Pollution Prevention

SUCCESS STORY, September 2006

Catholic Healthcare West

On June 24, 1998, the American Hospital Association (AHA) and the United States Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA) began a landmark agreement identifying goals to reduce the impact of healthcare wastes on the environment. One goal, the virtual elimination of mercury-containing waste from hospitals nationwide by 2005, became California's SB 1916 voluntary challenge project.

To assist in the effort to eliminate mercury from medical facilities, the California Department of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC) developed the Mercury (Hg) Elimination Leadership Program (HELP). Through this program, DTSC trained hospitals in mercury elimination and gave awards to mercury-free hospitals, newly built mercury-free hospitals, and corporations achieving an overall removal rate of 75 percent.

Catholic Healthcare West participated in the Mercury (Hg) Elimination Leadership Program. California hospitals contribute 5 to 10 percent of the total mercury in wastewater arriving at publicly owned treatment works. Through participation in the HELP program, Catholic Healthcare West and other hospitals reduced the amount of mercury in California hospitals by over two tons.

Mercury is a reproductive toxin and a potent neurotoxin. When hospitals throw away mercury-containing devices such as fever thermometers, blood pressure measuring devices, and other mercury-containing products, the chemical can reenter the environment. According to the U.S. EPA, medical waste incinerators are the fourth largest source of mercury re-entering the environment. In addition, it estimates that mercury fever thermometers contribute about 17 tons of mercury disposed of in solid waste landfills annually.

DTSC Mercury Elimination Program (HELP)

FACTS:

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